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## Archaeological Interpretation and Current Events: Some Reflections on the War in Ukraine from the Point of View of Philosophy of Archaeology and Anthropology

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### Abstract

Russia's brutal invasion into Ukraine, launched in 2022, has been widely condemned internationally. Using an interdisciplinary perspective, this paper investigates the notions of *spheres of influence* and *personalist authoritarianism* as they appear in international relations debates on the war in Ukraine. Interpretative tropes parallel to Russian versus Western spheres of influence as they figure in debates about Ukraine also appear in archaeological narratives of the Neolithic and Bronze Age transformations that progress from demographic growth to increasing competition over resources and exclusionary resource bases. Moreover, the personalist authoritarian system of Putin's Russia parallels the idea of the exclusionary power of archaeological elites. However, the in-efficiency and corruption of Putin's personalist authoritarianism as a root cause of the inefficiency of the Russian war effort are rarely raised as issues regarding the concept of elites in archaeology.

### Keywords

Spheres of Influence, Realism, Personalist and Collectivist Authoritarianism, Aggrandizing, Political Organisation

### Zusammenfassung

Russlands brutale Invasion in die Ukraine im Jahr 2022 ist international weitgehend verurteilt worden. Interdisziplinär werden in diesem Beitrag die Begriffe *spheres of influence* und *personalised authoritarianism* untersucht, wie sie in den Debatten über den Krieg in der Ukraine in den Politikwissenschaften benutzt werden. Interpretationen, die parallel zu den russischen beziehungsweise westlichen Einflussphären in den Debatten über die Ukraine auftauchen, finden sich auch in archäologischen Narrativen über neolithische und bronzzeitliche Transformationen, die von einem demographischen Wachstum zu einem zunehmenden Wettbewerb um Ressourcen und den sozialen Ausschluss von Ressourcen führen. Auch das personalistisch-autoritäre System von Putins Russland weist Parallelen zur Idee der ausschließenden Macht archäologischer Eliten auf, doch die Ineffizienz und Korruption von beispielsweise Putins personalistischem Autoritarismus als Ursache für die Ineffizienz der russischen Kriegsanstrengungen wird in Bezug auf das Konzept der Eliten in der Archäologie selten angesprochen.

### Schlagwörter

Einflussphäre, Realismus, personalistischer und kollektiver Autoritarismus, politische Organisation

## Introduction

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, as Russia launched a brutal invasion into Ukraine, many in Europe and around the world were shocked. How could such a war be launched in Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As of the time of writing this paper, unspeakable destruction, human rights violations, and suffering continue to be inflicted, not only upon Ukraine but also on the Russian population and others drawn into the conflict. The manner in which this is happening is shocking and defies reason for many, also in archaeology (see, e.g., Bošković 2022).

Historical events such as these can be defining moments that shape the way we understand the world around us, as they become generational experiences. In this paper, we aim to reflect upon some issues that could arise for archaeological interpretation from the conflict in Ukraine. At first glance, the connection between the conflict and archaeology might seem distant. However, as we will demonstrate below, many of the interpretative tropes and contexts used to understand the causes of the conflict are, upon deeper analysis, familiar to us from archaeological and anthropological theory.

To be more specific, understanding the war in Ukraine leads us to reconsider certain cultural evolutionary tropes of conflicts and the factors that drive conflict potential in human beings. Our specific argument is that the notions of spheres of influence and the effectiveness of personalist authoritarian systems have been questioned in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, yet the same or parallel concepts appear without problem in certain popular and widely accepted archaeological interpretations of the past, particularly regarding the late Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age processes of individualization and social stratification. The following considerations provide further details, which are elaborated on in the text below.

From the philosophical question of the nature of humans as peaceable or confrontational beings, we quickly delve into questions about the evolutionary advantages of confrontational behaviours that seek to safeguard and demonstrate security, resource access, and ability. In the international relations literature, a popular framework referred to as *realism* draws from the evolutionary concept of individual fitness, extrapolated to the scale of nation-states. States are seen as actors interested in their own survival, which involves creating and safeguarding their own spheres of influence. These spheres of influence can be understood as akin to biological territories that encompass economic, military, and political realms, representing the exclusive zones of hegemony for particular nation-states, which will be defended accordingly. Certain interpretations in the international relations literature regarding the thinking of Vladimir Putin and his strategists point precisely in this direction.

Parallel interpretative tropes can be found in the archaeological narratives of the Neolithic and Bronze Age transformations, which trace the progression from demographic growth to increasing competition over resources and exclusionary control over resource bases (e.g., Shennan 2008). In other words, similar notions of spheres of influence, as discussed in contemporary contexts, appear in these archaeological narratives. The first discrepancy we wish to highlight is that while the Russian right to assert its sphere of influence over smaller sovereign states is vigorously disputed (rightfully so), those same spheres of influence are seen not only as unproblematic but also as indicative of societal flourishing, as evidenced in the late Neolithic, Bronze Age, and subsequent periods.

Next, our article delves into analysing the failures of the Russian war effort as characterized in the media and international relations analysis. In this regard, a particularly relevant distinction made in the international relations literature is between *personalist* and *collectivist authoritarianism*, and we aim to explore the implications of this distinction in archaeology. The analysis of the failure of Russia's war effort points to well-known weaknesses of personalist authoritarian systems, as evidenced in Russia under Putin's leadership. Such systems encounter serious problems in the transfer of information both top-down and bottom-up, leading to catastrophic deficiencies as illustrated by Russia's failure in the war.

Simultaneously, there are interpretative approaches in archaeology and anthropology that emphasize the emergence and success of the individual from the late Neolithic period to the Bronze Age and beyond. Some of these approaches go as far as to attribute significant changes in archaeology to powerful individuals, suggesting a parallel to personalist authoritarian figures and "strongmen" in contemporary political events. These individuals are portrayed as leaders during periods of flourishing when power is established and maintained, international trade emerges, and technology develops. Again, by contrast, in the context of the war in Ukraine today, individualism in

the form of personalist authoritarianism appears as a remarkably weak form of political organisation, something that does not appear to register in archaeological contexts.

The purpose of this article is to highlight that approaches and understandings that many find repulsive in the context of the war in Ukraine may have parallel applications in archaeological and anthropological theory, where they receive less scrutiny. By illuminating these parallels and connections between the past and the present, we aim to facilitate a greater reflective awareness and, ultimately, objectivity in explanatory practices in archaeology. In this sense, we consider ourselves engaged in the philosophy of science, exploring the foundations of scientific knowledge production practices (in the spirit of Kuhn 1996 and Bloor 1976, 1983).

### **Human Condition and Evolutionary Advantage**

One of the oldest and central philosophical questions revolves around the fundamental nature of human beings: are we essentially peaceable or confrontational? This abstract and contextless question may not lead us very far, but it becomes intriguing when related to modern ideas about evolutionary advantage (compare Fontijn 2021a). To bring these connections to light is our aim in the present section.

Anthropology often traces the exploration of the fundamental human character regarding war and peace back to two early modern philosophical influences (Otto et al. 2006; Sahlins 2008). On one hand, we have the French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755), who argued that human beings are essentially peaceable and compassionate. On the other hand, we have the opposing school of thought, stemming from the early modern philosopher Thomas Hobbes, which viewed the original or natural human state as characterized by a “war of all against all” (Hobbes 1642, 1651). The reception of these concepts in archaeological and anthropological research, according to Helle Vandkilde (2006b: 106), experienced “periodic ups and downs for either view.” If Vandkilde is correct, the question of human nature is always as much a question of that nature itself as it is about how we have conceived it in different periods. Using the famous terminology of the philosopher of science, Thomas S. Kuhn (1996), one could argue that the concept of human nature reflects different paradigms or paradigmatic understandings of the human being and the human condition.

While the 17<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Hobbes predates these developments by a considerable margin, in anthropology the Hobbesian concept found its natural place in the cultural evolutionary understanding of human beings stemming from Charles Darwin’s work. Classic cultural evolutionary anthropology (e.g., Service 1962) examined human development through the lens of adaptation. The entirety of human history can be seen as exemplifying this evolutionary trend of “how human societies transformed from small mobile groups to settled communities [with] social complexity [and] institutionalization of social inequality” (Oka et al. 2018: 68). Just as a bird could better adapt to environmental changes through the colour of its feathers resulting from random mutations in its genes, which, due to its survival success, would be passed on to future generations, human groups and societies could likewise develop technological, political, social, and cultural strategies to adapt to challenges (Childe 1936). This perspective implied that the development of technological and other strategies in complex societies represented a greater level of human adaptation. Consequently, the now criticized concept of stages of cultural evolution emerged. This notion, in turn, supported the belief that strategically complex societies were more advanced than their “primitive” counterparts that Europeans encountered and colonized.

The Hobbesian concept of human nature seemed to align with what the Darwinian concept of cultural evolution proposed later, namely, that human beings were naturally inclined to seek their own advantage in the struggle for survival and reproduction, based on the principle of the fittest. This drive to survive and reproduce was fundamental to human behaviour, and in the absence of more advanced strategic considerations, the natural state would logically be a “war of all against all.”

One of the most striking implications of these philosophies is the idea of the human socio-cultural world as a “dog-eat-dog” world. As recently criticized by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021: 17), the evolutionary view suggests that “humans are at base somewhat nasty and selfish creatures.” The logic is that if individuals and groups do not actively pursue and defend their self-interest, they would be overrun by those who do. Such biologicistic

concepts, or human behavioural ecology, describe a common perception of the prehistoric development of human life under the pressures of demographic and environmental factors, within which particular behaviours flourish and thrive. In this sense, referring to Quamrul Ashraf and Oded Galor (2011), Stephen Shennan (2018: 3) argued that “the population growth rate associated with a given economic strategy at a specific point in time is a measure of its success.”

In a more general argument, Shennan (2008: 86–87) presents a Malthusian dynamic for the Central European Neolithic. According to this perspective, the pressures of demographic growth, settlement of available land, and reaching local carrying capacities would lead to the emergence of “institutions ... that integrated larger numbers of people into a cooperating unit [and] could be more successful in competition than groups not integrated in this way” and so “other groups had little option but to copy them if they wished to avoid potentially disastrous consequences” (however, compare, e.g., Müller 2000). Shennan further draws attention to the few known, large-scale massacres of the Neolithic period in Central Europe (see Schulting 2013) to illustrate the possibility that demographic pressures and disputes over land and resources may have resulted in violence. The imagery presented suggests that biologically and culturally expansive groups overpower others by securing territory through advanced technological, political, and socio-cultural means, as will be discussed further below in relation to the onset of the Bronze Age:

“Farming spread because it enabled people to be reproductively successful by colonising new territories that had low-density forager populations, so long as they kept passing on the knowledge, practices, and the crops and animals themselves, to their children.” (Shennan 2018: 1)

However, this is just one recent example, as such approaches can be traced back to a broader view rooted in evolutionary theory in archaeology and anthropology. For instance, in his essay, *The Law of Cultural Dominance*, David Kaplan (1960) distinguishes between specific and general dominance. Specific dominance is related to niche construction theory, where “upon ultimate success the victorious species is finally the sole exploiter of the contested resources of its niche” (Kaplan 1960: 70). In contrast, general dominance is associated with the increasing complexity of societies or internal heterogeneity. While specific dominance aligns with ever smaller niches, general dominance extends its influence over a broader range of environments and cultures, logically resulting in larger and overall less diverse cultures. A contemporary example of this could be the so-called Global North or Western Culture. In summary, the law of cultural dominance states that “that cultural system which more effectively exploits the energy resources of a given environment will tend to spread in that environment at the expense of less effective systems” (Kaplan 1960: 75).

Similarly, Allen W. Johnson and Timothy Earle (1987: 4) argued that “the reality of cultural evolution is an accepted truth.” However, they acknowledge a disillusionment that progress would inevitably lead to increasing well-being (Johnson and Earle 1987: 2). Instead, they propose a narrative of limited choices in accepting change, where

“[a]s competition [...] increases, people must live close together to defend themselves, their stored foods, and their lands. Leadership becomes a necessity for defense and alliance formation. [...] In this light, population growth and a chain reaction of economic and social changes underlie cultural evolution.” (Johnson and Earle 1987: 5)

Similarly, following the examples mentioned earlier, they argue that “fundamentally, it is population growth (of which warfare [...] is one result) that propels the evolution of economy” (Johnson and Earle 1987: 5).

We want to clarify that the examples mentioned are not intended as attacks on moral standpoints but rather demonstrate how such approaches may seem natural when interpreting prehistoric transformations but simplistic or plain wrong models of human flourishing in modern contexts. Our own past research is not necessarily free from such premises about the human condition when modelling population growth and carrying capacities (Ohlrau 2015, 2020).

With ideas like these about how human groups thrive, we are brought to the battlefields of international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as we will explore in the next section.

## Realism and Spheres of Influence

The preceding analogies to biological and cultural evolutionary ideas lay the foundation for the emergence of similar concepts in the analysis of international relations. In the following paragraphs, we will examine the emerging perspective in selected international relations literature, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine, regarding the use of the concept of *spheres of influence*.

One influential school of thought in international relations is known as *realism*. According to a classic text on the subject (Wight 1966), realism depicts states as the smallest units of analysis and emphasizes their pursuit of self-preservation. In the struggle for survival, there is no higher authority to which states can reasonably or effectively appeal, such as a normative or moral order as perceived by alternative critical and constructivist theories of international relations (see, e.g., Wendt 1995). This does not mean that agreements cannot be made or norms followed in the “realist world,” but these actions are driven by instrumental motives to ensure survival, as the alternative of all-out confrontation would be strategically worse (Bull 1977). In fact, Hobbes also argued that instead of remaining in a state of natural war, humans may form instrumental alliances to restrain hostility for mutual advantage, as peace would bring greater benefits than pervasive fear and destruction.

Realism directs our attention to the concept of *spheres of influence* (Hast 2016; Jackson 2020). The international relations literature acknowledges that the concept has rarely been strictly defined (see, e.g., Buranelli 2018). Nevertheless, the basic idea is that according to realist analysis, states often create and assert their own sphere of influence, which encompasses a geographical area and may include smaller independent or semi-independent states that the great power dominates, to the exclusion of other great powers. As described by a recent foreign relations theorist, spheres of influence typically involve

“some amount of *control* over a given territory or polity by a foreign/outside actor, especially as regards third-party relations, and *exclusion* of other external actors from exercising that same kind of control over the same space.” (Jackson 2020: 255; emphasis in the original)

Conceptually, a sphere of influence is therefore similar to a geographic territory in a biological sense, representing an exclusionary safe zone where the dominant power can exert cultural and political hegemony and exploit resources. The earliest known uses of the term “sphere of influence” date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when imperial powers negotiated the extent of their territorial possessions around the world (Jackson 2020: 256).

The parallels between realism, spheres of influence, and the theory of evolution are not coincidental (for an explicit case made in the foreign relations literature, see Thayer 2004). Darwinian evolution recognizes survival and reproduction as intrinsic human drives, with territoriality playing a crucial role in that context. Similarly, influential scholars in international theory, like Wight, often employ biologicistic terms such as “survival” to describe international affairs. Likewise, in the context of the war in Ukraine, there is talk of an “existential threat” purportedly posed by expansionist Russia or posed by Russia to its neighbouring nations. The imagery employed is heavily biologicistic.

In one of the most comprehensive studies on the concept of spheres of influence in international relations, Susanna Hast (2016) examines the various aspects and stages of the concept’s existence. Among other things, she critically notes the association of the concept in the literature with a certain notion of “necessary” order, with the Hobbesian state of chaos conceived as the only alternative. That is, the organization of the international order around recognized and respected spheres of influence held by great powers often appears as a necessary prerequisite for a sustainable order, to the extent that Hast observes that it is seen as “far more important than humanitarian protection or minority rights” (Hast 2016: 3).

In this context, Vladimir Putin is interpreted as attempting to reestablish the Russian sphere of influence, disregarding humanitarian protections and the rights or desires of the nations that happen to fall within Putin’s conceived sphere of influence. As historians and international relations scholars Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill state:

“[a]s he [Putin] defines Moscow’s sphere of influence in this new arrangement, that sphere extends to all the space in Europe and Eurasia that once fell within the boundaries of the Russian Empire and the USSR. Within these vast contours, Putin and Russia have interests that need to be taken into account, interests that override those of all others.” (Hill and Gaddy 2015: 393)

A similar perspective was presented by international relations analyst Michael Kofman, who stated that “Russian elites hold a rather classical great-power view of the international system in which small states don’t have full sovereignty” (Kofman 2018). Similarly, Hast argues that “[i]t is not particularly difficult to prove that there is an image of Russia trying to consolidate a sphere of influence within the post-Soviet space” in the international relations literature (Hast 2016: 15). In his recent speeches, Putin has drawn comparisons between himself and past Russian imperial rulers, such as Peter the Great,<sup>1</sup> who historically annexed territories in Finland and the Baltic States (see also Dunn and Bobick 2014).

In this context, one of the central elements of Russian propaganda, as analysed in ongoing EU anti-propaganda projects such as EU vs Disinfo,<sup>2</sup> has been the idea that NATO and the “expansion of the West” pose an “existential threat” to Russia (see also Sarotte 2021). Some commentators dismiss this as pure opportunism and propaganda from the Russians. However, others, including the well-known American foreign affairs analyst and “realist” John Mearsheimer (2014, 2022), argue that claims to spheres of influence are “realistically” legitimate and Russia was provoked to intervene in Ukraine due to encroachment by the West into its sphere of influence. Mearsheimer and the realist school of thought are controversial in the international relations literature, but realism remains one of the main, and perhaps most influential, schools of thought in the foreign relations literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Korab-Karpowicz 2017).

Nevertheless, in the biological analogy, an existential threat can be understood as a reduction in the ability of an organism to provide for itself if its territory, sphere of influence, and hegemony are diminished. In this context, what represents the “Russian organism”? Putin’s Russia has been described as an illiberal mafia state, where a strong civil society, free media, and an educated and prosperous middle class pose an existential threat (Harding 2011). This is why Moscow has responded forcefully to liberal “orange” or “colour revolutions,” such as those in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2013, and Belarus in 2020. A highly hierarchical political economy centred around Putin and his inner circle (Zygar 2016) might not survive similar developments in Moscow.

In archaeological contexts, the term “spheres of influence” can indeed be found. It is unclear whether a cultural evolutionary conception of territoriality underlies these uses (in some cases cited below, clearly not). However, they appear in the context of studies on social complexity, the formation of hierarchies, and similar topics (see, e.g., Arnold 1995; Glatz 2009; Pitts 2010). There are instances where the term is employed to describe the influence of regional centres on their hinterlands, such as in the Andes and Mesoamerica (Blanton 1975) or in the context of *Fürstentum* (Knipper et al. 2014; Veit 2015). Nevertheless, there is no dedicated development of theory on spheres of influence in archaeology. Especially in the European Iron Age, it is often used synonymously with territory. It is possible that the term has become part of common language, where no specific evolutionary or conceptual background is necessarily implied by its use.

It appears evident, however, that hypothetical scenarios, such as the one we mentioned earlier regarding demographic expansion and the resulting violent encounters in the Central European Neolithic, and specifically the idea that evolutionary advantage could be gained through the formation of expansionist groups prepared to confront and inflict violence, align conceptually with the thinking behind spheres of influence and the underlying “realist” worldview. The difference, however, lies in the fact that in the context of prehistory, we seem to have no particular doubts, perhaps due to temporal distance, about the perceived necessity of violence in human affairs. In contemporary contexts, on the other hand, we can rightly be outraged when violence is employed as a solution or continues to be part of political and diplomatic processes.

More significantly, there exists a further contrast between contemporary and archaeological perspectives on spheres of influence. In archaeology, the struggle over territory and resources, over spheres of influence, is viewed as driving human civilization forward. In the examples mentioned earlier, demographic expansion and technological advancements coincide with geographic expansion – an imagery of a flourishing human society. However, in

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1 New York Times, 9 June 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/09/world/europe/putin-peter-the-great.html>. Last viewed 30.8.2023.

2 See, e.g., <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/kremlins-tightrope-walk-between-fear-and-bravado/>. Last viewed 30.8.2023. The EU vs Disinfo website is a project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force of the European Union.

the context of the war in Ukraine, Russian expansionism is perceived by many as anything but a case of societal or civilizational progress. It is seen as a longing for past glories, a regression rather than a flourishing.

Most importantly, the notion that humans should struggle for spheres of influence, that it is natural to do so as it aligns with certain premises of biological evolution and flourishing, appears central to the archaeological perspectives mentioned earlier. That the world should be divided in spheres of influence appears as something of a necessary, natural, and sustainable order parallel to how we saw “realists” about international relations view it. In contrast, regarding the Russian expansion of its sphere of influence today, many do not consider it a natural inclination at all. It is regarded as a deeply political process reflecting not biological necessities, but rather imperialist and expansionist fantasies with deeper cultural roots.

### Ethnicity

Given the history of archaeology and its close historical connections to nationalist thought concerning “blood and soil” (notable from the work of Gustaf Kossinna; see Furholt 2018), it seems necessary to briefly address this topic. An integral part of the biologicistic, evolutionary imagery is the notion of kinship and ethnic ties. Anthropology generally recognizes that a strictly biological concept of kinship relationships cannot be seriously maintained (see, e.g., Kuper 2000). However, evolutionary theory is inherently based on the idea of a biological transmission of favorable traits, which evokes a kinship context of some kind.

In Putin’s thinking, we encounter the notion that alleged kinship and ethnic ties cement Russia and Ukraine together. In his notorious speech in July 2021, Putin spoke of

“the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space [...] to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another [...] Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory – from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov – were bound together by one language”<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, Putin conceives of Ukraine as “an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space”, as he stated in the speech in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine on 21 February 2022.<sup>4</sup>

Engaging in a factual debate with Putin’s partial and selective account of prehistory would be both futile and misguided. It is evident that Putin and his speechwriters do not aim to produce an accurate interpretation of history but rather one that serves their present-day political objectives. Such accounts often reach back in time but conveniently halt at an arbitrary point designated as “the beginning” to which the present should supposedly adhere. Moreover, even if such a “beginning” existed, why should contemporary borders and generations of Ukrainians, Estonians, members of other Baltic nations, Finns, Poles, and many other affected nations conform to what may have been in the past?

In this regard, a more intriguing question arises: how is identity, tradition, and a shared past being constructed and shaped here? We suggest that one aspect of this narrative is the recognition of the power of biologicistic explanations (compare Arponen et al. 2019).<sup>5</sup> The natural sciences and biological explanations are prominent examples of “hard” causal explanations, and therefore, if one’s political, socio-cultural, and other “soft” accounts of the human condition can somehow evoke elements of these processes and forces, they may appear to gain additional authority. Appeals to shared ancestry, rooted in the cohabitation and transmission of a common and evolving socio-cultural and biological heritage, invoke a basis in “hard” science, lending an aura of incredible credibility to our political narratives.

3 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>. Last viewed 30.8.2023.

4 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>. Last viewed 30.8.2023.

5 Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower denotes the broad concept of power deriving from the normative definition of biological or other natural normalcy (see, e.g., Foucault 1990, 1991).



## Personalist Authoritarianism

One last aspect we wish to highlight and discuss in the context of the war in Ukraine pertains to the nature of authoritarianism and the models of *individualistic* political systems circulating in archaeology and anthropology.

To begin with, in the international relations literature on authoritarianism (predating the war), a distinction is often made between two forms: *collective authoritarianism* and *personalist authoritarianism* (Frantz 2018; Geddes et al. 2018). Personalist authoritarianism refers to an authoritarian form of government centred around an individual or a small group at the top, while collectivist authoritarianism refers to a broader-based form, such as party-centred authoritarianism. The Chinese Communist Party has been cited as a paradigmatic example of collectivist authoritarianism (although there has been a notable shift towards personalism under Xi Jinping; see, e.g., Shirk 2018; So 2019). Over the years, the government of Russia under Vladimir Putin has increasingly taken the character of a personalist authoritarian system.

The military, organizational, and logistical failure of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has starkly highlighted the weaknesses of personalist authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> Known issues with personalist authoritarianism revolve around the implementation and monitoring of policies, which by definition require a broader group than the personalist apex to execute, which requires the apex to receive accurate information about what is going in the field (Geddes et al. 2018: 129). Indications suggest that the reforms introduced by the Putin regime in the Russian military (such as the promotion of Sergei Shoigu to Minister of Defence in 2012; Zygar 2016) were undermined by pervasive corruption within the lower echelons of the system, resulting in a discrepancy between the intended operability of the newest Russian army units and hardware and their actual capabilities. Reports from various media sources, including the story of the deserted Russian soldier Junior Sergeant Pavel Filatyev,<sup>7</sup> reveal that information flow from the army regarding training and other processes was routinely distorted by lower levels of command to present a favourable image to the top, which the apex itself was unable to verify. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that once the initial spearhead attack aimed at capturing Kyiv failed – built in part on the false belief that Ukrainians were essentially Russians who would willingly submit to new masters – the Russian army became increasingly entangled in logistical difficulties in sustaining the war effort. On higher political and diplomatic levels of government, similar dysfunction was recently described by the former Russian Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Boris Bondarev (2022): “[t]he war shows that decisions made in echo chambers can backfire.” Complex events can never be attributed to a single cause, but these and other examples can be cited to illustrate the challenges personalist authoritarianism faces in the flow and implementation of information.

It is worth noting that many political commentators, including former insiders, observed a similar dysfunctional dynamic in the Trump presidential administration, where Trump’s personalist leadership led him to surround himself with “yes-men” (Wolff 2018; Wright 2019; Woodward 2020). These individuals created an information bubble that reinforced his biases, obsessions, and misconceptions, while suppressing any corrective inputs.

The interpretation of collective and personalist forms of authoritarianism in archaeology and anthropology is an ongoing and important question. As highlighted by Oka et al. 2018, as quoted earlier, human history is often portrayed as a progression from egalitarian beginnings to increasing social complexity, with the development of hierarchies seen as essential and perhaps inevitable (Price and Feinman 2010). Within this narrative framework, the concept of a personalist leader, such as the Bronze Age alpha male warrior, finds a seemingly easy fit and use (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005; Earle and Kristiansen 2010c; see also Tobias L. Kienlin’s critique in 2018).

For instance, Earle and Kristian Kristiansen (2010b) describe the emergence of a warrior aristocracy, characterized by personalist rule supported by displays of elite warriorhood. This aristocracy is believed to have controlled trade with the Mediterranean, engaged in metal production and distribution, and buried their leaders in prestigious barrows. Similarly, the Corded Ware culture is marked by single grave burials interpreted as powerful individuals, potentially associated with a militaristic inclination evidenced by the presence of battle axes. The rise of burial mounds is equated with the emergence of chieftains, as described by Vandkilde (2006a). These characterizations

6 <https://ecfr.eu/article/lessons-for-the-west-russias-military-failures-in-ukraine/>. Last viewed 30.8.2023.

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/17/they-turned-us-into-savages-russian-soldier-describes-start-of-ukraine-invasion>. Last viewed 30.8.2023.

emphasize the individualistic and personalist leadership of the “free man,” as highlighted by Earle and Kristiansen (2010a: 17): “The barrow ritually defined the free man, his family, and his property, and it defined the male warrior as chieftain.” The individualism of the male warrior supposedly manifests in archaeological evidence of grooming instruments, developments in fighting techniques, and subjective experiences of warriors, drawing analogies with phenomena from the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Warnier 2011; Horn 2022).

Elsewhere, the concept of *Kriegergefolgschaften* among the Germanic tribes has been proposed to have existed during the early Medieval period, with potential roots dating back to the Bronze Age. These ideas present a similar imagery of a successful political system based on personalist leadership (e.g., Harding 2011). For example, the discovery of a hoard containing multiple spears and just a single sword (Kaul 2003) has been interpreted as evidence of a sword-bearing leader and their associated group, known as a *Gefolgschaft*. The qualities of the leader are believed to lie in their ability to project military might and accumulate prestige. However, the specific leadership qualities or potential of such a personalist leader are not thoroughly discussed in these interpretations.

Such individuals, often referred to as strongmen (Rachman 2022), are believed to have ruled Bronze Age Europe through their personal authority, which was underpinned by personal bonds rather than written agreements, within decentralized power networks (Kristiansen 2014: 9). Some argue that clan-related feuds with personal motivations emerged during the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods (Peter-Röcher 2007: 187–190; cited in Meller 2017). While these claims are easily made, it is worth considering what kind of leadership these individuals provided and the basis of information upon which they operated. Modern knowledge of personalist systems leads us to question their abilities in both respects. Interestingly, full-fledged armies under the strict rule of a class of “princes” have been envisioned for Early Bronze Age Únětice societies (Meller 2017), suggesting that such systems operated with relative ease and few constraints.

Moreover, personalist-looking elites are often seen as efficient organizers of communal activities, such as construction projects. For instance, in Neolithic Ireland, ancient DNA studies have been interpreted as evidence for the existence of a closely-knit, hereditary elite who even practiced endogamous marriage. They are believed to have commanded labour power, enabling them to construct massive ceremonial sites such as Newgrange (Cassidy et al. 2020). Generally, there is no consideration given to the idea that such personalist elites may have been inefficient in their endeavours; instead, the prevailing view is that they were highly effective.

This imagery of the personalist leader appears to be a generalized hypothetical figure that can be applied to various prehistoric contexts. They are portrayed as aggrandizers, individuals who aggressively pursue their own self-interests, and have been suggested to constitute a small but highly influential element in all populations. They are believed to have played a significant role in driving cultural transformations over the past 40,000 years (Hayden 2014: 17). Once again, the power of a biologicistic explanation is being invoked, as aggrandizers are seen as embodying behavioural patterns that provide evolutionary advantages.

However, the Russian failures in the war in Ukraine, particularly if we view them as failures of personalist authoritarianism, should make us reconsider. These contemporary events prompt us to reconsider the actual power of individualism to achieve the kinds of historical transformations that are often attributed to it.

All that being said, some archaeologists recognize the potential drawbacks of personalist authoritarianism. For instance, David Fontijn (2021b: 91) recently offered a critical perspective on the “current emphasis on the rise of individual power in late prehistory,” citing examples such as the princely graves of Hallstatt or the elite interpretation of rich warrior burials in monumental Bronze Age graves. Similarly, Kienlin and Klára P. Fischl (2020: 103) argued that Carpathian Bronze Age tell sites were “home, supposedly, to some kind of functionally and politically differentiated population composed of peasants, craft specialists – and those in charge of all this,” a model that, however “involves considerable extrapolation from the archaeological record [and] resulting narratives are catchy, but the underlying assumptions are problematic.” Joanna Sofaer, Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Magdolna Vicze (2020: 163) observe that “[r]ather than investigating the data, the tell narrative has further consolidated assumptions about hierarchical societies in which leaders and their followers exercised control.” Further, as Christian Horn (2022: 3) remarks “[...] warriors are often portrayed as relatively unproblematic for past societies [...].” Drawing an analogy to modern times, one might question what leadership qualities such individuals bring to the table and what kind of information they have access to when making decisions.

More broadly, the current geopolitical situation prompts us to critically question the concepts of spheres of influence and personalist authoritarianism, as well as the underlying biologicistic worldview that we have discussed and its applications in archaeology. As a colleague, who will remain anonymous, aptly remarked, reading the literature on Bronze Age leadership gives the impression that there is “a Putin on every hilltop.” This further emphasizes the main point of this paper, which is that our scientific understanding of the evolution of human societies often relies on imagery that not only has political implications for the present but also may conflict with our thoughts and feelings about contemporary world events.

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